

For kids' sake, state Supreme Court needs balance

Jody Mull is a board member of Stand for Children Washington, an advocacy group that supports education reform efforts such as charter schools.

By Jody Mull
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This year, for the first time in our eight-year history of supporting and working for education champions in our state, the Stand for Children Washington PAC Board decided to endorse candidates in the state Supreme Court races. The News Tribune criticized our financial support of these candidates in [a recent editorial](#) ("Calling foul on Supreme contributions," 8/3).

We didn't enter into the decision lightly; however, we had become increasingly concerned that recent decisions by the court have reflected political beliefs rather than impartial judgment. And that gives us pause.

The Washington Supreme Court, led by Justice Barbara Madsen, made two recent decisions that felt more political than judicial in our estimation.

The first, in September 2014, was to fine the state Legislature for lack of progress in fully funding our state's education system. While we support the Court's initial McCleary decision and believe the Legislature needs to increase funding for basic education; we fail to see how the court's decision to fine the Legislature has helped move that process along.

In 2013, just months before the fine, the Legislature had invested an additional billion dollars – an 11 percent increase in basic education. And in its original decision, the court had given legislators until 2018 to complete their efforts to fully fund education.

The second decision, in September 2015, regarded the legality of public charter schools. Even though Washington voters approved charter schools in 2012 and there is a state commission overseeing the operation of the schools, the Supreme Court ruled them unconstitutional. And they made this decision after the schools had opened.

The merits of this decision were highly questionable. The News Tribune editorial board called for the court to reconsider it. Four former Washington attorneys general, from both political parties, filed a brief asking the justices to review and reverse the ruling, as did current Attorney General Bob Ferguson.

The Supreme Court declined. But with the support of the Legislature and a key school district partner, charter schools found the money to remain open.

As an education advocacy organization, our priority is to put children first. Our mission is to ensure all children, regardless of background, graduate from high school prepared for, and with access to, college or career training.

Washington has a graduation rate of 77 percent, well below the national average of 82 percent. It also has achievement gaps between more affluent students and lower income and students of color that are some of the highest in the country. Our education system has a lot of opportunity for improvement.

We unapologetically believe public charter schools can help our state address the inequity in graduation rates. When the voter-approved public charter schools opened in 2015, 70 percent of children attending were from communities of color and two-thirds were on reduced lunch.

Mid-year performance assessments showed dramatic improvement in student achievement, and we anticipate results released this month will support our conviction that Washington's public charter schools are providing a critical service in communities of color.

However, we are so much more than a supporter of charters.

In 2009, we advocated for the expansion of the definition of basic education to include full-day kindergarten, smaller class sizes in early grades and an increase in instructional hours, among other educational benefits. We also advocated for the BEST (Beginning Educator Support Team) program, designed to provide sustained and purposeful support to educators in the beginning of their careers.

In 2013, we were a key supporter of an academic acceleration bill that provides funds and other resources to automatically enroll eligible high school students into advanced course work, allowing for disadvantaged students to take college prep classes.

We agree with The News Tribune editorial board's assessment on the selection of Supreme Court justices: They should be appointed, not elected. Until that time, there needs to be balance in the court. We are not convinced there is.

Jody Mull is a Bellevue resident and a board member of Stand for Children Washington.

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